HISTORY OF LAND OCCUPATION, UTILIZATION, AND TENURE IN THE ILLINOIS MILITARY TRACT TO 1900

BY

THEODORE LEONARD CARLSON

A. B., Augustana College, 1929
A. M., University of Illinois, 1933

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1947

URBANA, ILLINOIS
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HISTORY OF LAND OCCUPATION, UTILIZATION, AND TENURE IN THE ILLINOIS MILITARY TRACT TO 1900

1. The Promised Land

Land grants as rewards for military service have long been the policy of nations fortunate in having land available for distribution. In 1811, when war with Great Britain was imminent, it was deemed necessary to increase the size of the military forces and place the country on a war footing by securing more enlistments. Accordingly, on December 24, 1811, an act was passed offering a bounty of $16 upon enlistment for five years, with the additional provision that upon honorable discharge each recruit was to receive a mustering-out compensation equivalent to three months' pay and 160 acres of land. Other acts of a similar nature were passed in 1812, 1813, and 1814, all designed to secure more enlistments by offering land bounties and money inducements.

In order to fulfill these promises of bounty grants, Congress created a military reserve in that part of Illinois lying between the Illinois and the Mississippi rivers. Of the total area of approximately 5,500,000 acres comprising the Illinois Military Tract, 3,500,000 acres were surveyed and set aside for the soldiers of the War of 1812. From October, 1817, through January, 1819, some 17,000 patents were issued for over 2,800,000 acres in this region. Areas remaining after the bounty payments had been completed were retained by the governmnt and later made subject to entry and purchase similar to other public lands.

The region selected as a military reserve was well chosen. Nature has probably produced little better land anywhere in an area of suitable climate for man to cultivate with less risk. From the viewpoint of the early pioneer settler no region in the West could hold better promise for development of agriculture and commerce. Here was fertile soil, well-drained by numerous streams providing water and means of transportation, and ample timber for buildings, fuel, and fencing.

The Military Tract includes an area of approximately 8,700 square miles, with wide variations in surface features and soil characteristics. In a general way, it can be divided topographically into two parts: the bottom lands running largely along the two rivers, and the uplands which lie from 200 to 300 feet above the level of the main watercourses and comprise approximately 90 per cent of the total area. The latter, in turn, can be divided into two parts: the southern half, whose surface originally was covered for the greater part by forests, and the northern half, where the original surface

was predominantly prairie. Approximately two-thirds of the entire area was prairie and the remainder timber land. The surface of the southern half of the tract is more diversified, with frequent hills and valleys, prairie, and heavily timbered woodlands. The land is generally rolling and on the borders of the streams quite broken and hilly. The surface of the northern part appears better adapted to cultivation. Here the land is generally level, or gently undulating, except on the borders of the wooded streams where it becomes broken and hilly.

Very few of the soldiers receiving bounty lands cared to settle on them. Even if the returning veterans had been inclined to give up their former homes and accustomed habits and occupations, the remoteness of the Illinois Military Tract from the Eastern centers of population was sufficient to deter many. Nevertheless, the pioneers living close to the military lands realized their value and settlements began to move slowly northward. The southern portions were occupied largely by immigrants from the Southern states. Soon, however, pioneers from Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania were settling among the Kentuckians, Tennesseeans, Virginians, and Carolinians.

The problem of selection of lands by the early pioneers was largely a matter of judgment based on past experience. The value of frontier land was not determined so much by its fertility and the labor expended upon it as by its location in relation to navigable rivers. Without markets, labor applied on the land was of little value in itself in assuring great economic improvement on the frontier.

The conditions which the early settler faced in his new home only tended to strengthen his prejudices against the prairie which he may have brought with him from his former home. Since the migrant carried little with him to his new home, he was dependent almost entirely on his new environment for the necessaries of life. Of these, food, water, and shelter could best be obtained from the timber lands. Consequently, tardiness in settling the prairie lands of the Military Tract was not due entirely to a lack of good judgment on the part of the early pioneers. Weighing the many advantages and disadvantages of both types of land, it was not long before the early settlers arrived at the sound conclusion that a combination of both timber and prairie lands insured the greatest success in farming.

In consequence of the general acceptance of this principle, the small prairies surrounded by timber in the southern counties of the tract were quickly taken up in the twenties and by the thirties the movement northward into the prairie counties had begun. Here, however, the limited amount of timber soon was exhausted and migration was again retarded. In many cases, speculators realizing

the value of the timber on the edge of the prairies, had bought the choice timbered tracts and were holding them off the market for high prices. In retaliation, the settler frequently helped himself to these unoccupied timber lots and justified his action on the ground that by using the material to improve his own lands he was enriching the country and enhancing the value of the land of the non-resident who should be made to pay a part of the expense.

Nevertheless, most settlers were convinced that their fortunes lay close to wood and water, and that even where these could be secured on the prairies the difficulties of transportation remained an obstacle sufficient to insure failure for the foolhardy adventurer who might attempt to locate on the larger prairies. As long as a farmer in the interior regions of the tract could not sell his surplus products in the local market for cash at any price, and the cost of transportation to a cash market was often more than the article was worth, there was little inducement for the settlers to give up the free gifts of nature—timber, water, and protection—to settle on prairie land where water must be obtained by digging costly wells, and raw material for buildings, fuel, and fence was scarce and consequently expensive.

In view of the many natural advantages of the Military Tract, early settlers and speculators alike were disappointed in their expectation of a rapid influx of farmers into the region with a resultant enhancement of land values. Early contemporary writers, voicing the feeling of the pioneers, frequently ignored the fact that settlement of the tract compared favorably with other parts of the state and blamed its seemingly retarded development and prosperity on the land speculator and the difficulty of securing actual title to the land.

By 1830, the Military Tract contained a population of almost 13,000, or over eight per cent of the total population of Illinois. Approximately 80 per cent of the inhabitants were located in the five counties in the extreme southern and eastern part—Calhoun, Pike, Adams, Schuyler, and Fulton. Whereas the population of the entire state barely doubled in the next decade, that of the tract increased over 600 per cent, containing 20 per cent of the total population of the state. Since good land could often be purchased in the tract at less than the price of "Congress land" in other parts of the state, large numbers continued to pour into this region. By 1840, the settlers were rapidly moving northward, the five afore-mentioned counties now contained only 45 per cent of the total. However, as late as 1850 the rate of settlement of the prairie counties in the interior of the tract continued to be less than that of the other counties along the two rivers.

The attempt to encourage settlement by the founding of colonies

was an interesting feature of the Military Tract. The motives underlying the organization of these colonizing societies were varied; in some cases, they were religious or communistic experiments; in other cases, mere speculative ventures by which the promoters hoped to enrich themselves at the expense of the actual colonizing settler, and, in a few instances, a sincere attempt on the part of a group to establish a successful colony which, by cooperative efforts through successful organization or force of numbers, could better meet the problems of the frontier. In general, these ventures failed, sometimes because the promoters were interested only in the speculative profits rather than the welfare of the settlers, often because friction and disputes arose from the disagreements among the colonists themselves, frequenty because of the hostility evidenced by the neighboring settlers toward these colonists and their purposes, and also because on the frontier there was greater opportunity for personal advancement through individual exertion and effort.

An unusually large number of these experimental societies bought land in the northern part of the Military Tract. Henry County's development in its early years was due largely to its occupation by colonies rather than by individuals. The largest and most influential was established at Bishop Hill where the Jansonists, a Swedish religious group, carried on an interesting experiment in communism.

The settlement of the Mormons in and around Nauvoo in Hancock County on the western border of the tract was of even greater significance. Shortly after the exodus of the Mormons, Nauvoo became the center of another interesting colonizing venture, this time a communistic experiment by a colony of Frenchmen under the leadership of Etienne Cabet. However, here in Icaria, as in Bishop Hill, people with alien theories and philosophies attempted to found colonies inconsistent with the institutions of the West. And in both cases their communistic Utopias failed to weather the internal strife and the struggle for individualistic expression on the part of its members.

II. Conflict Between the Right of Possession and the Possession of Right.

The anticipated rapid settlement with the possibility of enhanced land values had led many Eastern capitalists to purchase the land patents from the soldiers almost as rapidly as they were issued. A few wealthy land speculators quickly seized the opportunity of piling up large holdings. Practically every member of Congress in 1818 speculated in bounty lands. After the Panic of 1819 had set in, the thousands of bounty land tracts again dumped on the market

by the smaller speculators because of the financial disturbances helped to create such a glut on the market that land prices fell rapidly. The small purchasers who had burned their fingers were glad to drop their holdings with the result that substantial areas were purchased by large speculators and land companies who could afford to hold on until the ever-increasing immigration into the military lands would bring a decided increase in land values. This, however, proved longer than anticipated.

Hasty assumptions might be made that the Eastern land speculators took advantage of the soldiers because of their willingness to dispose of their land patents for anything that might be offered. It is true that many a fine quarter-section of land was disposed of for a horse, a cow, a watch, a gun, a saddle, a pair of shoes, or some other consideration of small value. However, a careful study of the land transfer deeds of the period indicate that $115 was about the average price paid for a quarter-section. A further study of transfers from 1827 to 1833 reveal an average consideration of less than $50 each. Since most of the soldiers had disposed of their holdings before 1825 this would indicate that more purchasers of the soldier land patents were forced to take a loss than were able to show a profit on their speculation. Bought with high hopes of profit, land was later offered for sale for everything and anything, and if not disposed of in this way, it usually was sold by the state for non-payment of taxes.

Thus, the early speculator had little profit to show for his efforts. Migration into the tract was slow throughout the twenties; by 1830, only 13,000 settlers were living in the tract, considerably less than the 17,000 soldiers who had originally received the patents. In 1831, the Quincy Land Office was established, which gradually began throwing lands on the market at the minimum price of $1.25 an acre. Although land values showed a steady increase during the next decade, with the great amount of lands available at low prices, years were to elapse before the purchasers of land for settlement would be forced to pay a very high premium in order to acquire good land.

According to the enabling act which admitted Illinois into the Union, bounty lands were to be free from taxation for three years after date of the patent. Thus, the appropriation of three million acres of land for military bounties provided a source of taxes to the state which otherwise would have had to wait several years before securing any tax revenue from these lands. In fact, it provided such a large non-resident tax list that during the early years most of the revenue raised by the state came almost exclusively from the tax on the non-residents who owned lands in the Military Tract. If the taxes were not paid, the state auditor was empowered to advertise the land for sale and collect the amount of the taxes from the proceeds of each sale.

In March, 1820, 1,463 parcels of land in the Military Tract were advertised for sale as delinquent tax lands. By 1823, this had increased to almost 9,000 quarter-sections. This was almost half of the total amount of land that had been given to the soldiers originally as bounties. During the next ten years from six to nine thousand tracts containing from a million to a million and a half acres of non-resident lands became subject to sale for non-payment of taxes each year. Although the lands sold at these tax sales were subject to redemption by their owners upon certain conditions, only a small part of such lands was actually redeemed.

Several types of land speculators were active in the Military Tract. Of these the wealthy professional speculator or land company purchased the largest amount of land in the region. Purchasing bounty land patents and tax titles at minimum prices, these individuals or corporations possessed sufficient capital to hold on to the land until a profit could be realized. Their newspaper advertisements, pamphlets, and land agents painted the pictures of the land and its productive possibilities in glowing and often exaggerated terms. They did much to arouse in the Eastern states an interest in the Military Tract and encourage settlement therein. On the other hand, their policy of holding some of the best lands off the market in anticipation of higher prices aroused the resentment of the poorer settlers who had no capital for purchases and were forced to move further west in search of other lands or become tenants of these large landholders. Also, the fact that so many of the tracts remained in the hands of Eastern owners added to the general confusion regarding land titles, thus increasing the amount of court litigation necessary to untangle the threads.

Another group of speculators was composed of numerous small business men, bankers, editors, politicians, lawyers, and government officials who made a venture in bounty lands by purchasing patent titles or tax titles at low prices and expecting to sell them as soon as a rise in their market value would yield a small profit. They or their agents were frequently found at the tax sales at Vandalia, or, after 1833, at the various county seats in the Military Tract purchasing delinquent tax lands for a few cents an acre. Land thus bought for from two to five dollars a quarter-section would be sold soon afterwards for from ten to twenty dollars. Although in many cases these speculators sold the land for over double what they had paid, it was only by purchasing and selling large amounts of land that any substantial profits could be realized.

Thus, the small pioneer farmer often was forced to become a squatter on his land. If he settled on bounty lands, frequently the patent or tax title was owned by someone in the East; if he occupied "Congress land" there was no way of acquiring title until the land

became subject to entry at the land office in Quincy or Dixon. If he had acquired actual title to his land by purchase of a patent, he usually bought more than he could profitably use. With little produce to sell and often no market for what he had to sell, he lived under the general expectation that the rapid settlement of the country would enable him to sell his surplus land at a high price. Everyone hoped to get rich quick at the expense of the future newcomer. However, the ratio of a handful of settlers to millions of acres of land was an economic factor beyond the immediate control of the land speculator.

The squatters who had no right to their land usually were able to maintain their holdings and improvements because of public opinion. Actually they were merely trespassers and intruders subject to removal by the marshal or military forces. However, "squatter's rights" on otherwise unclaimed public domain became so recognized on the frontier as to acquire a binding force equal to any legal institution. In the Military Tract these squatters had often selected the most desirable locations long before the land office in the district was opened or the holders of the bounty land titles appeared. Public opinion in the West recognized the validity of these claims to the extent that later settlers were forced to buy the improvements made by the early squatters before taking possession.

Legislation, executive rulings, and legal opinions framed by the indignant Easterners were met by equally definite and exact rules and regulations supported by public opinion of the frontier. The laws seemed to protect the rights of the absentee landowner as against the squatter; public opinion protected the squatter against the law. Squatter's rights, illegal though they may be, were a *fait accompli:* Congress needed only to condone and legalize them through preemption laws.

The various types of land titles added to the general confusion. A settler who was able to locate the owner under one title could never be assured that there might not be other claimants to his property. Thus, a squatter who had secured ownership under a tax title might put costly improvements on his land and yet remain in constant fear of the appearance of another claimant with a better title. As the population of the Military Tract increased, a greater number of claimants bearing patent titles put in their appearance, flooding the courts with controversies.

In order to give protection to the actual settlers and to secure them in their title to their occupied land, the Illinois legislature passed the "Quieting Title Act." The Act of March 2, 1839, provided that any person in the actual possession of land for seven successive years after the passage of the Act, and who has paid all taxes legally

assessed on such land should be considered as the legal owner of his lands to the extent and according to the purpose of his paper title. Thus, a tax deed accepted as *prima facie* evidence of title would give "color of title," but the courts held that the deed must be one that was not void on its face by reason of defects. To render the Auditor's deed of land sold for taxes actual evidence of title it was incumbent on the party offering it to show the performance of all the preliminary acts required by law. In view of the many irregularities of tax sales the way was now opened for an increased number of land disputes. The lower courts, more sympathetic to the actual occupants of the land, frequently returned decisions favorable to the holders of the tax title. However, the higher Court saw fit to reverse the decisions whenever title was not proven perfect under the provisions of the state laws.

After such decisions by the Court protecting the patent title holders, the land agents made a systematic search of the files of the General Land Office at Washington for any information that might give light regarding soldier claimants. For many years every piece of land was investigated and every patent title carefully examined. As time went on the operation of the statutes of limitation and possession finally cleared up the general confusion of title complications. Thus, at long last, the farmer settler felt secure on his occupied land and could safely make the investments and improvements which would redound not only to his own advantage but to the more rapid development of the Military Tract as a whole.

III. Land Occupation and Utilization.

By the middle of the 19th century the prairie counties of the Military Tract had reached as high a stage of economic development as was possible under the limitations of the existing transportation facilities. The small prairies surrounded by timber had all been taken up, but the larger prairies, except for the wooded regions on the borders, still defied the settler. The prairie counties which constituted 37 per cent of the total land area contained only 17 per cent of the total number of farms in the tract, and 28 per cent of the total acreage in production.

The need for railroads to supplement the water transportation was apparent and the Military Tract joined in the great clamor for the internal improvement system that was to spider web the state with ribbons of iron rails. The consequent waste of millions of dollars was a costly lesson in the evils of inflation and over-optimism. However, the desire for railroads, based on a justified need, was not forgotten; it was merely postponed in the face of immediate problems created by the backwash of depression in the early forties.

The general economic improvement around the middle of the century encouraged a spirit of confidence that stimulated business and industry after the long period of depression. This brought renewed demands for railroad construction which would reach the interior resources of the state not tapped by water transportation. The agitation for railroads spread like wildfire up and down the Military Tract. Public meetings were called for the purpose of creating greater interest in railroads. Every enterprising hamlet had visions of becoming an important commercial city if at least one railroad could be built through the community. Prosperity would be assured for the farm and urban populations alike.

Many forces were operating to fan into flame railroad enterprise in areas where the smouldering embers of caution were retarding development, or the spark of leadership was lacking. Town investors and land speculators were always alert to the possibilities of increased land values by railroad building and aroused the support of those less interested in the projects; civic-minded leaders, merchants, and local politicians, through the press constantly portrayed in glowing terms the great advantages a railroad would bring to the community. In most cases, the farmers needed little urging; they voted subscriptions to railroad stock in their county, and sometimes even mortgaged their farms to buy stock in the projects. However, all this did not provide sufficient capital. Eastern capitalists, who were always ready to promote railroads by working up local enthusiasm in order to secure as much money as possible from the counties and towns, would finally assist with the financing by putting up money of their own. The usual result was that the control of the Western railroad passed into the hands of the Easterners.

Once again the settlers of the Military Tract, who so long had been plagued by Eastern absentee ownership of their land, were faced with Eastern domination of their economic welfare through control of their means of transportation. And once again, the farmer was to rise to the challenge. In the same manner as the democratic West had protected its land holdings through institutions of its own creation, such as squatter's rights and settler's associations, and had forced its representatives in the government to pass legislation giving security of title and preemption, so the farmers in the seventies were to organize their granges and associations and turn to their legislatures to secure needed protection against Eastern control of their economic life. However, in the fifties, the farmers needed railroads, and railroads required money, so the farmers grabbed the bait of the Eastern capitalists to secure the money to build them.

There was no lack of promoters willing to undertake the task of organizing railroad companies. Thousands of miles were authorized by the state legislature, thousands more were projected on paper.

and still more thousands dreamed of by the people as a result of their apparent insatiable desire for railroads. If all the lines had been built that had been incorporated or projected, the Military Tract would have been a veritable network of roads running in all directions. However, of all the thousands of miles projected in the 1850's, less than 400 miles were constructed and in actual operation by 1860. Two-thirds of this mileage was already coordinated under the single management of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad.

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The expansion of markets changed the agricultural economy of the Military Tract; the modern history of the region dates from the coming of the railroad. By 1860, the old theory that "trade will follow the rivers" had been largely superceded. The artificial channels of trade, the railroads and the Illinois-Michigan Canal, tapped new regions and old regions alike, and poured the products of the Military Tract into the commercial channels moving eastward. The effect of the coming of the railroad was tremendous. Where empty prairies had once been, new villages came into existence. Villages with a dozen houses became thriving towns. One stream of population poured into the towns and another moved out on the prairies. Farm produce was in great demand, prices were good, and farmers and merchants alike did a thriving business. The dream of the early settlers seemed about to come true. The resources of the West were pouring into the East to be exchanged for cash and Eastern goods. While cars loaded with grain and stock moved to Eastern markets, at the same time, lumber, merchandise, and farm machinery moved westward to the farms. Prosperity for the farmers, which had always seemed to be only a matter of time, now appeared to be within reach.

With the coming of the railroads the complete settlement of the prairies was assured. The two chief obstacles--the want of timber for fencing, fuel, and buildings, and the access to a cash market for crops--were overcome by the railroad. No longer did the percentage of land in farms in the Military Tract decrease directly with the distance from the rivers. Settlers poured into the counties of Henry, Bureau, Stark, Knox, Warren, and McDonough in ever-increasing numbers. The Military Tract, as a whole, showed the most rapid increase between 1850 and 1860 of any decade in the history of its development. Although the greater part of this increase was due to migration from other counties of Illinois and other states, particularly from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, and Kentucky, immigration from foreign countries also played an important part in swelling the total. By 1870 approximately 16 per cent of the total population was of foreign origin. More than one-third of these immigrants had come from Germany, but about 15,000 Irish and a like number of Scandanavians contributed important numbers to the

rapidly augmenting population. By 1870, the Military Tract was beginning to reach the peak in the growth of its agricultural inhabitants. In the succeeding decades, the counties which were largely rural, with no large cities, remained about stationary or in some cases actually decreased in population.

Expanding markets and increased population drove the price of farm lands to higher levels. In 1850, the average cash value of farm lands, including fence and buildings, was only about $9 an acre; ten years later, the value of improved farm lands had more than doubled, averaging about $22 an acre. By 1870, farm lands had almost doubled again in price, at that time averaging almost $42 an acre.

Thus, the advent of the railroad revolutionized agriculture in the Military Tract. The old self-sufficient farm economy and dependence on small local markets gave way to more specialized farming and the production of "cash crops" to be sold on the expanding markets now made easily accessible. Farming became a business which required great intelligence and alertness in crop selection, in the use of labor and capital, and the marketing of crops. As new markets opened up in the East and in Europe, more production was needed, and to supply this demand the West, always faced by a shortage of labor, now turned to the use of farm machinery. Now the latent advantage of the prairie farmer immediately became apparent. The broad, flat prairies were well adapted to the use of the new and heavier farm machinery, and the prairie farmer was quick to take advantage of this new economic factor which would enable him to outdistance other farmers, previously considered more fortunate in their choice of farms. The prairie farmer apparently had finally come into his own.

The remarkable stimulation of agriculture in the 1850's caused by increased foreign demand and resultant high prices, railroad expansion, extensive immigration, augmented land purchases, and expansion of grain production resulted in an unprecedented prosperity which in turn stimulated purchases of land and equipment on credit. New land could be cropped with wheat the first year, and, with the high prices obtainable, would sometimes realize in a single year double the cost of its original price. Confidently anticipating a continuation of high prices and high yields, new settlers were encouraged by the optimism of the time and the easy credit available to purchase land on slim margins. The older settlers expanded their holdings and indulged in extravagant purchases on credit easily secured from the stores in the neighboring towns. The increasing land values attracted speculators eagerly seeking out choice locations likely to be favored by future railroad development. A gambler's risk on a good guess might mean a fortune.

In this condition of inflated prices and land values, loose money, and easy credit, the Panic of 1857 hit the West. The purchase of land on a slender cash margin was comparatively safe when the economic trend was upwards, but it proved dangerous in time of financial distress and uncertainty. Prices were so low that the small amount of money obtained for the products sold was not sufficient to pay current expenses, much less discharge the heavy indebtedness incurred by the buying of more land, farm implements, improvements, and extravagant household purchases made on a credit basis.

From bitter experience the farmer learned that dependence on a single staple crop had been unwise. The stock growers had not felt the depression as severely as had the farmers who had depended on the small grains. A mixed type of farming combining wheat, corn, and meat production appeared to be the solution. Given good harvests and fair prices, combined with better farming methods, to reduce the cost of production, the future of the farmer seemed secure.

As in most parts of Illinois, wheat and corn were the chief staple cereal crops of the early settler in the Military Tract. However, as land increased in value and wheat production became less profitable, it tended to move westward to new lands. Corn, however, maintained its leadership. Easy to grow and easy on the soil, the only conditions lacking were a market and a reasonable steady market price. By 1840, almost twice as much land was planted in corn as in wheat, and almost five times as many bushels were produced.

The fattening of hogs, in time, became the natural accompaniment of corn production. By 1840, the Military Tract which contained less than one-fifth of the total land area in Illinois and 20 per cent of the population of the state, produced a little less than one-fifth of the corn and approximately 20 per cent of the swine. This would indicate no particular concentration of either corn or hogs in this early period. During the two decades after 1850, the concentration of hogs in the corn belt is especially marked. Given adequate transportation facilities, the region between the Illinois and the Mississippi, ideally adapted to corn growing, was producing by 1870 approximately one-fourth of the swine and corn in the state. The next ten-year period, 1870-1880, witnessed an even greater degree of concentration in hog production; the number of swine more than doubled and the average for each farm increased from 17 to 29. Price was the most important determinant in the corn-hog economy. The price of corn and pork varied considerably through the years so that the ratio of one to the other determined to some extent the amount of pork produced and of corn sold on the market.

Beef production also was the natural accompaniment of corn

growing. The prairie regions in the northern part of the tract seemed particularly adapted to livestock raising. The use of the open prairie for grazing purposes cost neither rent nor taxes whereas the use of land for corn or wheat production required purchase money and immediate financial outlays for labor, material, improvements, enclosure, and equipment.

With the coming of the railroad and the increasing number of settlers establishing themselves on the open prairie land, the open range began to disappear and stock farming entered into a new era. Since many farmers in the early days had to haul their grain many miles to a market, it was easier to make their corn walk to market by feeding it to the stock. Thus, in the early period, corn was fed to the cattle as the easiest and most profitable way of transporting it. However, with the improved transportation facilities in the fifties, and the gradual disappearance of the open range, stock raising became a business. No longer were cattle raised merely as a means of disposing of corn: the raising of cattle for beef became the chief object and corn was produced in order to make better beef for sale. After 1850 stock farming depended no longer on the natural advantage of open pasturage but upon economic condition, in many cases, beyond the control of the farmer. To the continual dangers of drouth and disease were added the problem of high railroad rates and fluctuating market prices.

Thus, a definite change in the character of farming in the Military Tract was evident by the close of the Civil War. A much larger amount of farm produce was being sent to the market in the form of fat cattle and hogs than formerly. Many farmers were beginning to accept the principle that nothing should be sold from the farm which could not walk away. Thus, grain and hay should be marketed only by feeding it to livestock. Increasing attention was being paid to improvement of breeds in order to obtain earlier maturity, better quality, and higher prices. In general, by 1870, the Military Tract had changed from a two-crop system of corn and wheat to a mixed type of farming. Corn was king, but wheat growing in the south and livestock raising in the north were playing an important part in the agricultural economy.

The economic conditions of the seventies tended to strengthen the domination which the livestock industry enjoyed in the Military Tract. The decline in prices and the scarcity of money accompanying the financial crisis of 1873 further depressed the small profits made by the farmer on the grain market. The hazards connected with wheat growing caused the farmers to turn more and more to greater diversification. Crops such as corn, oats, and hay possessed the double merit of being salable on the market as cash commodities or of being fed on the farm to stock.

Moreover, the concentration of the meat packing industry in Chicago, and the development of the range cattle industry in the western prairie regions of Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas, both easily accessible to the Military Tract, led to the increasing importance of feeding hogs and fattening Western cattle for the Eastern markets.

IV. Farm Indebtedness and Land Tenure.

With the termination of the war in 1865, agriculture, which for four years had been keyed to a war economy, had to be adjusted to peacetime needs. Under the exigencies of war, normal and evolutionary developments often were too slow; in the increased tempo of war activity, decision replaced deliberation and success rewarded the efforts of the venturesome. But the rapid economic changes made under stress of war created many of the problems which were difficult of solution on the succeeding years. The need for feeding the armies created an extraordinary demand for farm products. The resulting high prices which prevailed during the greater part of the period served to stimulate the farmers to renewed efforts. Despite the shortage of labor, more land was put under cultivation, the number of farms increased, and, in general production of grains and meats advanced accordingly.

The long-awaited dream of sure profits through expansion of markets, slowly becoming an actuality after the building of the railroads, reached sudden fruition under the stimulation of war conditions. Although the increased total production in proportion to the number of agricultural workers employed can be largely explained by the introduction of new and improved machinery, other factors were of more or less significance. Part of the credit for the increased productivity should go to the farmer himself. A more intelligent and scientific attitude is evidenced by his willingness to experiment with new crops, his adoption of better methods of cultivation, the improvement of stock through importation of blooded breeds, his earnest desire to improve his knowledge by subscribing to farm journals, and his active participation in agricultural societies and county fairs. The irregular annual yields of wheat and the fluctuating prices of corn caused many thoughtful farmers to diversify their production or turn to another cash money crop.

Despite these great advances in agriculture, many farmers still remained ignorant of the new developments, planting and harvesting the same crops in the same manner on the same fields as had proved somewhat successful in the past. Crop rotation appeared to be coming into general acceptance by the time of the Civil War but as yet the majority of the farmers did not recognize the need of fertilizers.

The expansion of acreage and production as the result of the stimulation of high prices and greater mechanization is well reflected in the rise of farm values in the Military Tract during the years preceding and immediately following the Civil War. Whereas the average cash value of each farm, including land, fence, and building, was less than $1,500 in 1850, by 1860, it had increased to $3,100, and ten years later amounted to $5,240. In the new agricultural machine age more capital investment in land, buildings, machines, and equipment was necessary; hence, the problem of securing an adequate return on the increased investment became a basic problem of land tenure in the Military Tract.

Meanwhile, the general economic depression which began sweeping the country in 1873 continued to manifest itself throughout the decade in the form of low prices and declining farm values. Depression conditions, coupled with excellent European crops, drove the price of most farm products down to the lowest point of the decade in 1878. Along with prices, farm values also showed a noticeable decline during this decade: the average cash value of each farm falling from $5,240 in 1870 to little more than $4,400 in 1880. Farm value was now being measured in terms of productivity: the best utilization of each acre became the test of good farming. The greater productivity of the northern counties of the tract which emphasized livestock production is reflected in the higher average land values. The market value of a farm now was determined on the basis of capitalized earnings.

In general, the 1870's was a period of disillusionment and discouragement for many farmers in the Military Tract. The bright hopes of the sixties for certain profits had vanished. Bankruptcy and failure often appeared to be the inevitable reward for honest toil. Economic forces beyond the control of the farmer determined his destiny. On every side, scheming, selfish, vested interests appeared to be ever ready to rob him of the fruits of his labor. The peacetime agricultural difficulties called for drastic remedial measures. Inventive genius which had solved the problem of labor shortage during the war was forced to develop still better but less costly machines so as to reduce the cost of production of farm crops. Agricultural organizations which had attacked the problem of inefficient and wasteful methods of cultivation had to shift their attention to the solution of new problems by cooperative and united effort.

Confronted from the very beginning with the problem of securing access to a market where the prices would be sufficiently high to guarantee a reasonable return on the cost of production and transportation, the farmer saw the potential advantages to be gained by the larger expanded market frequently swallowed up by high railroad rates and elevator charges. As the farmer's dependence on

the railroads increased, the growing tendencies toward combination, consolidation, and subsequent monopolistic practices became of vital concern to him. The rapid increase of production on the prairies, the lack of barns, cribs, and adequate storage facilities on the farm, the lack of capital to enable the farmer to hold his crop off the market until more opportune times, all placed the farmer at the mercy of the railroad and warehouse managers. Public opposition to the railroad monopolies and their unjust extortions found immediate expression in indignation meetings and farmers' conventions. The general hue and cry against railroad combinations, and the resulting high rates and monopolistic practices, increased in volume as farm prices continued to drop. Agricultural organizations such as the Farmers' Clubs and the Grange grew in numbers and influence and farm leaders began to urge the farmers to express their determined opposition in political nominations and elections.

The clouds of gloom and despondency which had engulfed the farmers during the depression years of the seventies began to show some signs of lifting in the latter part of the decade. Favorable climatic conditions provided high acreage yields which, with the poor harvests in Europe, resulted in profitable prices. However, the greater profits resulting provided additional stimulus for increased production of corn, oats, and wheat on the old lands, and at the same time, hastened the rapid settlement of new lands farther west. This increased acreage together with the better than average yields soon glutted the markets with enormous supplies of grain.

Beginning in 1884, the price of almost all farm products declined rapidly, and despite the better than average yields the total value received was much less than in previous years. In 1884 corn and oats were so depressed in value that only the worst years of the seventies and early sixties were comparable. Wheat was the lowest since 1860. The low price of corn in turn reduced that of pork and lard, but the consequent increased foreign demand tended to raise meat to a more renumerative level. This price differential in favor of meat accentuated the emphasis on a corn-hog economy in the Military Tract. By 1884, ten of the thirteen leading hog-producing counties of the state were located in this region.

Although not as significant as that of swine, a high degree of concentration in cattle was also apparent. Fourteen of the eighteen counties in the tract exceeded the state average of 32 to the square mile. Corn, as the necessary accompaniment of stock feeding, continued to receive marked attention. In many counties of the tract from one-fourth to a third of the land was planted in corn. Many farmers were beginning to devote more attention to the raising of oats, and the development of pasturage as a supplement to corn in the stock feeding type of farming.

Wheat production suffered a steady decline both in acreage and in production during the last two decades of the century. For a time the winter wheat farmers of the southern counties held their own fairly well in competition with the new wheat regions opened up in Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Kansas, but as the market became glutted and prices fell, the possibility of profit was increasingly more precarious. The growing of wheat in some northern parts of the tract gradually became a thing of the past.

The trend toward larger farms caused by the adoption of a corn-producing and hog-and-cattle-feeding economy continued during this period. The number of farms decreased by 1,600 and the average number of acres to the farm increased from 128 in 1880 to 135 in 1900.

The return of bad times increased the agitation against the railroads and their monopolistic and discriminatory rate policies. The farmers were determined that the railroads, by lowering freight rates, should share the burden of low prices and depression conditions. A growing interest in agricultural organizations was manifested. Social and educational farm meetings became decisive political-action groups, and "granger laws" were forced upon the law-making bodies.

In general, the eighties and early nineties were years of depression marked by low prices, declining profits, and increased farm indebtedness. Throughout most of this period the production of crops and livestock flourished, but often the cost of raising them exceeded their worth on the market. Prices fluctuated in relation to domestic and foreign economic conditions, but, on the whole, it was merely a matter of some years being worse than others.

Throughout the three decades following the Civil War there had been a constant development of all the factors which, from the viewpoint of the individual farmer, should promote greater efficiency in production, lower operating costs, and create more profits. These same factors, however, when operating on a large scale, created the conditions adverse to the farmer's interest. Increased immigration from European countries did not provide more farm hands in the older settled areas but, instead, competitors colonized on the new lands farther west. The widespread use of farm machinery solved the problem of labor shortage and lightened the physical burden of the tiller of the soil, but, at the same time, it led to a need for more borrowed capital, resulting in a fixed indebtedness which added to the mental anxiety of the farmer. In the Military Tract where the total value of farm machinery and implements in use increased by one-third from 1880 to 1900, much of these new purchases merely added to the indebtedness of the farmer without the compensating

factor of greater profits through reduced cost of operation. In fact, the general use of farm machinery, especially in the newly-opened prairie regions, tended to augment production tremendously resulting in surplus products and lower prices which made it even more difficult for the individual farmer to secure an adequate return on his larger capital investment.

The success attending the natural combination of corn and livestock production in the years immediately prior to and following the Civil War bore fruit in a rapid rise of land values. Many farmers in the tract took advantage of the increased price to sell their holdings in order to move west where cheap land could be secured and the opportunity for a larger return on a small investment seemed certain. Frequently the newcomer who moved in, as well as the old farmer who enlarged his holdings, was forced to run into debt in order to make the greater investment in land and machinery. Thus, the growth of mortgage indebtedness may be interpreted as evidence of the optimistic spirit of the times. It seemed wise to mortgage the future for the purpose of securing a greater acreage and improvements which in time would yield a larger return. For the most part, a mortgage was merely a business venture, and, in view of the relatively small number of foreclosures, generally a successful one.

The years following 1873 were hard for the farmers of the Military Tract. With markets saturated by the enormous production of the newly-opened Western lands, and with prices at record low levels in 1893, the farmer apparently had made little progress during the previous two decades. In many instances, he had become poorer; indebtedness had increased since many had been forced to mortgage their holdings in order to defray living expenses or had sold their farms at a sacrifice in order to take up new lands farther west. Moreover, there appears to be no decided increment in value of the land which would tend to offset losses on crops. In twenty years the average acreage value in the tract had increased little more than one dollar. Whereas in 1870 the average price was $41.57, in 1890, it was only $42.59. In 1870, approximately one-fourth of the farms in the Military Tract were mortgaged. Ten years later the number had increased to one-third, and by 1887, over two-fifths of all the farms carried a mortgage. In view of the general bad economic conditions throughout the greater part of the last three decades of the century, the steady increase in mortgage indebtedness must be considered as indicative of a severe struggle on the part of many farmers against adversity.

The conditions, often found on the frontier, of capital without labor on the one hand, and labor without capital on the other, led to the early development of tenancy in the Military Tract. Settlers lacking the necessary capital to purchase a farm could usually rent a

farm, thus taking the first step up the "tenure ladder" in the expectation of eventual ownership. Although records are lacking which would show to what extent tenancy was practiced in these early years, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that though not common, it at least existed.

The rapid rise in farm values before 1870 provided the opportunity for higher rents and greater speculative profits. The additional capital required to purchase land and machinery made it increasingly difficult for landless farmers to acquire farms of their own. The constant shortage of labor made the first step on the agricultural tenure ladder easy to reach: the subsequent steps toward the attainment of ownership depended largely on good crop yields and good prices. These frequently were not forthcoming; failure and disillusionment too often were the lot of the tenant farmer.

The increase in farm tenancy in the Military Tract following the Civil War can be attributed to several causes; (1) the rapid rise in land values served as an obstacle to immediate ownership of farmers with limited capital; (2) several bad growing seasons, coupled with a fall in agricultural prices throughout the greater part of the seventies, eighties, and early nineties, reduced farm income, thus causing the ladder theory not to operate; (3) many farmers who had originally purchased their farms by incurring a heavy indebtedness or who had mortgaged their land in order to expand their acreage at a time of rising land values, were hard put to meet the heavy interest charges in the subsequent period of poor crop yields and low prices, the resulting foreclosures caused the ladder theory to operate in reverse; (4) the steady increase in the value of land before 1870 and the prospect of further advances caused speculators to purchase farms and lease them to tenants while waiting for a profit to be realized; (5) this rapid rise and the expectation of still greater increases made it seem advantageous to many farmers, forced by advancing age to depend more on hired labor, to retire and lease their farms rather than sell; (6) the practice of many aged farmers to retire and turn over the management of their farms to someone near-of-kin as a tenant; (7) the greater attractions, better institutions and facilities for education, business careers, or social activities for the children in the cities resulted in a movement from the farm by many owners who preferred to lease their farms rather than sell.

In 1880, less than 30 per cent of all the farms in the Military Tract were operated by tenant farmers; ten years later almost 35 per cent were tenant farms; and by the end of the century the number had increased to almost 40 per cent. The picture of tenancy in the Military Tract is rather confused, but at the same time indicates the great number of economic factors operating during these years. The renter probably accepted tenancy as a mere temporary condition,

with the expectation that in time he would be able to purchase a farm of his own; however, economic conditions in the seventies and eighties as a rule were not kind to the farmer. Rising land values, high rents and transportation rates, and increasing capital costs combined with unfavorable prices all took their toll in adding to the discouragement and frustration of the tenant farmer. For many the dream of eventual land ownership was never realized.

VITA.

Theodore Leonard Carlson was born November 5, 1905, in Des Moines, Iowa. He attended the public schools of that city, graduating from East High School in 1921. After four years of business experience, he entered Augustana College of Rock Island, from where he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1929. During the next fourteen years he was engaged in teaching in various secondary schools in Illinois—six years in Cissna Park High School, four years in Urbana High School, and four years in East High School of Aurora. During these years he was also pursuing graduate study in summer sessions at the University of Illinois, University of Chicago, and Harvard University. He was granted the Master of Arts degree in History in 1933 by the University of Illinois. In 1943, he was appointed to the staff of Western Illinois State Teachers College. He is a member of Phi Delta Kappa, and author of *Aurora, Government and Institutions*, Aurora, 1940.